



THE OVERTONS



Cassius

from

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THE OVERTONS





"All the customers emerged wearing brown paper hats trimmed with gorgeous paper 'ribbons' and twirling 'windmills' in their hands."

THE OVERTONS

· A · STORY · FOR · CHILDREN ·

BY
· ELSIE · ORR ·

ILLUSTRATED
BY
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THE
OVERTONS

BY
ELSIE MACGREGOR



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THE OVERTONS.

Chapter I.

A GRAND NEW GAME.

COLDBOROUGH, in Yorkshire, was a very out-of-the-way place, bare and unpicturesque, and in no way pleasing to the eyes of lively young people. The Vicarage stood on a hill, in the midst of a wilderness of orchard and field, without any pretence of a flower garden. A long avenue

zigzagged from the road to the front door, where it ended in a gravel sweep, around part of which the children of the house had laboriously built a rockery. The surrounding country was flat and agricultural, with here a farmhouse, and there a straggling wood. The railway about a mile distant, and the "buzzers" of a neighbouring manufacturing town, made the only noises that reached this country spot. The village of Coldborough itself was very small, and the parish a large, straggling one.

The Overton children were very dull when November came, and the weather was too damp for outdoor games. As soon as their governess had trudged away through mist and mud after the morning lessons, several noses were flattened against the schoolroom windows, and several weary voices asked, "What shall we do?"

"Put away the books first," said Gwendoline briskly; and the room was soon in order.

A large bell summoned them to dinner—Gwendoline, Betty, Dulce, and Henry to the dining-room, and Kitty and Dorothy to the nursery, where Nurse and Baby joined them. This summons supplied them with occupation for half an hour; but when the six children met in the hall after the meal, there was that bothering question still staring them in the face, “What shall we do?” Of all questions this is one of the most annoying, and there is an indescribable feeling of wretchedness about it. But to-day Gwendoline and Betty were ready to meet it. All dinner-time they had been passing notes backwards and forwards under the table-cloth, as they sat side by side, and now the result was as follows:—

“We’ll have a shop.”

“All right. Where?”

“In the attics. Just you and I.”

“Dulce can be our servant.”

“And the others can live in houses and buy.”

“Grand. What sort of shop?”

"A grocer's."

"No, a draper's."

"All right."

"Children," said Gwendoline, with all the superiority of her fourteen years, "I've got such a nice thing to tell you. Come in here."

"It's me too," said Betty reproachfully. "I suggested it first, Gwen."

They all tumbled into the schoolroom, the younger ones giving vent to suppressed squeals of excitement.

Gwendoline said "Hush!" in a very commanding voice, shut the door, and perched herself on the ink-spattered table.

"Look here," she began, "Betty and I are going to have a shop in the attics. We'll have Dulce for our servant, because she's the next biggest; and the little ones can have houses in the other attics, and buy at the shop."

Henry rose indignant.

"I'm not a little one," he exclaimed; "I'm

the middle one! And I'm going to have a bank, and you'll all have to send me your 'week-ends' to keep for you."

"I'm going to have a bank too," cried Dorothy, aged seven, "to keep my own two-pences."

"No, Dorothy," whimpered Kitty, "I'm not going to live all by myself. I'll tell pappa."

"Oh, *do* be quiet!" cried Betty distractedly. "Of course they all begin squabbling."

"Dorothy and Kitty must live together," said Gwendoline.

"No!" cried Henry. "I want a clerk, and I'm going to have Dorothy."

"All right," agreed Gwendoline, turning to Kitty.—"Kitty, you must live by yourself. It will be very nice; you can have such a pretty house, and we'll invite you to tea."

"Can I have real tea, and give parties?" said Kitty sadly.

"I daresay Nurse will let you," said Gwendoline. "Now let us go up and see about

the attics ;” and she and Betty led the little band upstairs.

“The attics,” at the top of the house, consisted of four large empty rooms, with a very wide, bare passage, lighted by skylights. Gwendoline and Betty had already fixed on a bright, square room for their shop and house, while Henry chose the largest of the four for the bank, directly opposite the shop. Kitty agreed to inhabit the attic at the far end of the passage, and the middle one was left vacant.

All that afternoon the Vicarage was wrapped in silence. Mr. Overton worked peacefully in his library, while Mrs. Overton and Nurse had a regular overhauling of the girls’ clothes in the deserted schoolroom. Mrs. Overton remarked with satisfaction that “the dear children were very quiet,” and Nurse hoped they were not in mischief.

Up in the attics all was commotion. Gwendoline and Betty had devised an excellent plan

for the masonry of their abode. They fastened long cords from wall to wall, to which they pinned newspaper partitions to divide the rooms and passages. This plan was suggested to the other house-owners, who immediately set to work in like manner. Having revealed this much to the little ones, Gwendoline, Betty, and Dulce shut themselves into their house, and shouted threatening speeches through the keyhole to the effect that nobody was to peep in or there would be wars.

All the Overtons were of an inventive turn of mind, so when Kitty found herself left to furnish her house in solitude, she was not at a loss how to begin. Henry had graciously assisted her to hang the paper walls, and she had thanked him profusely as he and Dorothy shut themselves into the "big attic."

Now Kitty turned round once, and then set off downstairs at a brisk trot, opened the door at the foot of the steps, and made for the library as fast as socked legs can run.

"Come in!" was the low answer to her third pummel on the door, and in she walked.

"Please, pappa," she began.

This was the signal for Mr. Overton to remove his spectacles, lay down his pen, and prepare to listen.

"I hope this is not another complaint about Henry," he said gravely.

"No, pappa," said Kitty; "but could you give me some of those picksures with dogs in them?"

For a moment Mr. Overton puckered his brow. Then he replied,—

"I am afraid you may not have those pictures, Pussy; but I have some other pretty ones. Now, what are you going to do with them? I can't have them destroyed."

He was rummaging in a cupboard, and Kitty stood very near, wrapping her fat fingers in her white pinafore.

"They are to hung on my wall," she explained. "I've got a house, all of my very

own, in an akkit, and it has walls ; and the others have a house in all the nother akkits. I won't spoil them. Thank you, pappa."



Armed with the coloured prints, away hurried Kitty, and Mr. Overton returned to his

writing. He had scarcely caught what his little daughter had to tell him, but her prattling voice was a pleasure to him, and he smiled indulgently as he took up his pen once more.

Kitty set to work with pictures and pins, and then proceeded to furnish her mansion. She fetched her own "creepie stool" from the nursery, and her old chair and table which screwed and unscrewed and made themselves into a high chair. After much cross-examination as to the tidiness and cleanliness of the game, Nurse gave her two bits of an old gaily-striped rug, and Kitty stumbled over them upstairs, very joyously, to spread them for carpets in her sitting-rooms.

Very unwillingly did the hot, dishevelled house-furnishers emerge from their solitudes at the sound of the tea-bell, and glowing accounts were given at the schoolroom table of the "grand new game."

Mrs. Overton was escorted to the attics after tea by Gwendoline, Betty, and Dulce, and no one

but the favoured guest was taken into the shop.

Dorothy, Kitty, and Henry wondered rather jealously why Gwendoline, Betty, and Dulce spent such a long time in their mother's room when they should have been preparing their lessons, and why they were allowed to go down to the village while the three youngest were toiling up to bed. "I'm sure," whispered Dorothy to Kitty, "that Gwendoline and Betty have got their week-ends in advance."





Chapter II.

THE ATTICS.

MISS DAWSON had some trouble in keeping the attention of her young pupils during the following morning's lessons. Henry would put, "Dash, debtor to Dash," at the head of his addition sums; Kitty gave little jumps and excited squeals whenever she could find the slightest reason for so doing; Dorothy gazed dreamily out of the window, and

repeated her lessons in a sing-song voice ; Betty fidgeted with her feet, pushed back her chair, sighed, and rumpled her hair ; and the sedate Gwendoline was caught writing " Miss Ather-ton " all over her grammar book.

Dinner was a trying ordeal, and seemed dreadfully long. There was such a rush for the attics that Kitty ran off with her " feeder " on, and nobody thought about tidying the lesson books. They were all scrambling up the attic stairs, when Nurse opened the door below them, which had just been hastily slammed.

" Come down at once and put away everything in the schoolroom," she said ; " and, Kitty, take off your bib and put it in the nursery drawer.—Now, everything tidy, please, or you will all have to come down again."

With all their failings, the Overtons were a very obedient set of children, and they hurried to the schoolroom with a fairly good grace. All the lesson books were piled tidily in the cupboard, and Kitty's bib was neatly folded and

placed in the table-drawer in the nursery ; and then they all returned to the attics, Henry banging the stairs door, and exclaiming that he would not go down again that afternoon.

“Now, children,” said Gwendoline, as they all pressed round the door of the shop, which bore a large placard inscribed “Pansy Grove” in illuminated letters, “I’m going to show you —*we* are going to show you our house, but not the shop, because you are to begin to buy this afternoon.”

She flung open the door and conducted them along a paper-walled corridor, past the shop door, which was kept mysteriously shut, and into one room after another. Dulce was dusting in the drawing-room, and stopped proudly when the visitors entered.

“How lovely !” murmured Dorothy.

The walls were covered with pictures taken from magazines and books. A little table bore a crowd of photographs and a pot of red geraniums. On the floor was spread a piece

of bright chintz, and Gwen's, Betty's, and Dulce's three little camp-chairs were arranged about the room. The kitchen was as neat as a new pin. Paper saucepans made by Gwendoline's deft fingers, and cookery charts, hung on the walls, while a small deal table and an oil-stove to match were the only pieces of furniture.

Jealousy arose in Kitty's breast. "Mine isn't half as nice," she said sadly; "I wish mamma would give *me* chairs and things."

"You can't go bothering mother for things, Kitty," said Betty. "I'm sure your house is very nice for a little thing like you."

"Look," said Gwendoline, "I've painted the name on a bit of cardboard for you—'Apple-tree Arbour.' Isn't that grand? You can hang it on your door."

After all, Kitty was very easily pleased. She took the card and trotted happily away to her house.

"Now, don't all stand staring," cried Betty

good-naturedly. "Run off to your homes, and come and buy at the shop whenever you like. Wait, here's some money!" and she gave them each a handful of cardboard coins.

"We are the Misses Atherton," said Gwendoline.

"Well, I'm Mrs. Dashwood," said Kitty.

"What is Henry's name?" asked Gwendoline.

"Oh, I'm just the banker," said Henry, "and Dorothy can be Miss Banks. I've got such a splendid big ledger from father with a few pages torn out, and it's going to be my account book."

"We can't put anything in the bank till we get our week-ends, you know," said Dorothy, as she and Henry retired to the bank, "unless we were to get them in advance. How would that do?"

"Not at all," said Henry. "Mother says we are not to have them advanced any more, because last week everybody got theirs before Saturday."

The big attic was indeed a business-like apart-

ment. Over the door was written on a card, in bold, black characters, "Trafalgar Square," and the front part of the room represented this



square. The outer wall of the bank was slung on a cord across the middle of the room, and a door, bearing in large letters the word "Bank,"

folded back to disclose a table laden with useless papers, letters on a file, two or three dusty ink-pots, and a bundle of pens, all warranted not to write.

Kitty played with her dolls in "Appletree Arbour" for a while, and then trotted down the passage to the shop. Trembling with excitement, she pushed open the paper door and ventured in. Gwendoline was standing arranging things on a counter made of the sides of a wooden and cane-work crib. Kitty cast delighted glances at the glass-covered boxes, which contained rolls of baby-ribbon and small papers of pins. These things had a greater attraction for her than the muslin bags of chopped-up chocolate drops so cleverly arranged with pale-blue ribbons to fascinate the customers.

Betty was surprised to see that Kitty turned from the sweets and bought a yard of pink ribbon.

"You know my baby looks so pretty with

ribbons on," she explained, "and very poor people can't always afford chocklas."

"I understand," said one Miss Atherton.

"Sixpence, please," said the other.

"Isn't that rather dear?" asked Kitty, fumbling in her small purse.

"Don't be silly, Kitty," said Betty. "Gwen and I know how much things cost."

"Thank you. Good-bye," said Kitty, and she started homewards.

In a few minutes there was a bang on the Athertons' house door (that is, the real door of the room). Dulce was busy in the kitchen, so Gwendoline opened the door herself, and ushered Miss Banks into the drawing-room.

"A fine day, madam," said Dorothy grandly, as they each took a chair. "May I see your servant?"

"Sister, you mean," suggested Miss Atherton.

"No; your servant," said Miss Banks.

"Why, you little stupid, ladies don't come

and ask to see people's servants," said Miss Atherton.

"But I want to see Dulce," said Miss Banks.

"Look here, Gwen," exclaimed Dulce, appearing in the doorway, "it's awfully dull being a servant. I want to have a house as well."

"Betty!" called Gwendoline, "they've begun to squabble, of course. We can never have a game in peace. Oh dear; it is too bad!"

"O Gwen," cried Dorothy reproachfully, "I just wanted to see Dulce."

"And I don't like being stuck away in a horrid, uninteresting kitchen," complained Dulce.

"Hush, hush, hush!" said Betty, who had come in from the shop with her hands full of lace and ribbons. "I know what we'll do. Dulce can go and live with Kitty. She'll be only too glad. And, after all, Gwen, you and I don't want her.—Dorothy, say what you want to say to Dulce, and let's have no more fight-

ing." And, feeling that she was a very good peacemaker, away marched Betty.

The tea-bell soon intervened, and Gwendoline and Betty began to "tidy up" in hot haste.

"I say, Gwen," said Betty, "this shop will



come jolly expensive. Mother can't be always giving us extra sixpences."

"We'll have to make things," said Gwendoline; and all tea-time she was thinking out plans.

After tea, the two Misses Atherton might

be seen sitting in the unused attic, cutting the white margins off a pile of newspapers.

In the midst of his tidying Henry peeped in at the "middle attic" door, and caught a glimpse of long, painted strips of paper hanging over the old banner-pole.

"Go away, go away!" called out Gwendoline; and Henry shut the door quickly.





Chapter III.

A CATASTROPHE.

THE next afternoon Gwendoline and Betty gave out that their shop was finer than ever, and that hats and windmills might be purchased freely. Needless to say, there was a general rush for "Pansy Grove," and all the customers emerged wearing brown paper hats trimmed with gorgeous paper "ribbons," and twirling "windmills" in their hands. This toy consists of a stick, on the end of which a projecting pin holds a paper cut like the arms of a windmill, which, as it is carried quickly through the air, spins round and round.

The afternoon promised to be a very happy one. It was Saturday, and all the week-end

pennies had been banked, giving Henry a good deal to write in his big ledger.

Dulce had taken the name of "Mrs. Dashwood," with possession of "Appletree Arbour," and Kitty was to be her daughter. After some disputing over the name, Dulce settled on "Gladys," as it was her favourite. Dulce whisked a few things into place, and then sat down to read in her trim parlour.

Kitty sat in the nursery, back to back with Dulce, and only a paper wall between them. Silence reigned for some time, but at last Dulce took it into her head to get up from her chair. This she did, with the result that Kitty fell heavily backwards through the wall.

Poor Kitty's loud wail of surprise brought Gwendoline, Betty, Henry, and Dorothy running without ceremony into Mrs. Dashwood's house. Miss Dashwood was lying on the floor, half covered with torn newspapers, roaring astonishingly loud.

Either the bump or the roars must have

reached the rooms below, for Mr. Overton came hurrying upstairs and marching along the passage.

"What's all this?" he demanded, as he entered the ruined house.

"It *was* an awfully nice house, father," cried Dulce, forgetting Kitty in her eagerness to make a good impression.

"What has happened to my kitten?" said Mr. Overton, lifting his little daughter up in his arms.

"Children, what are you doing?" said an anxious voice, and their mother came bustling in.

In an instant the five children were clinging about her, all talking at once.

"The wall broke," said Dorothy.

"I was sitting back to back with her, and she fell," said Dulce.

"It was a paper wall," said Betty, "and they shouldn't lean against it."

"Poor little Kitty," said Gwendoline.

"No more playing to-day, Kitty," said Mrs. Overton, as she dismissed the children.—"Bring her downstairs, father."

Mr. Overton carried the sobbing Kitty away, and Mrs. Overton looked round the room.

"Whose house is this?" she asked, smiling.

"Mine," cried Dulce. "It was so nice!"

"But you must not be rough," said her mother, in a tone of gentle reproach.

"It was nobody's fault," Dulce hastened to explain; "and we won't be rough, mother."

"No, we won't," said Betty, coming up to be kissed; "we'll be ever so quiet. Don't you think it is a very nice quiet game, mother?"

"Very nice," Mrs. Overton agreed. "And now, I suppose, I must look in at the shop."

"And the bank, mother!" chimed in Henry and Dorothy.

After duly admiring shop and bank, Mrs. Overton went downstairs, leaving all the children repairing "Mrs. Dashwood's" wall. The rest of the afternoon passed peacefully enough.

Dulce solaced herself by inviting the Misses Atherton and Banks to tea, and feeding them on watered milk and sugar, with sweets from "Pansy Grove." After tea they sat conversing in the approved manner, until Dulce, growing tired of the party, said sweetly,—

"Don't you think you had better be going?"

"Oh yes," said Miss Banks with alacrity.

But the Misses Atherton objected.

"Dulce doesn't know a bit how to behave," said Betty.

"You're very unladylike, Mrs. D.," said Gwendoline.

Mrs. Dashwood was equal to the occasion. She rose haughtily, rang an imaginary bell for an imaginary servant, and said,—

"Luciana, show these ladies the door.—Miss Atherton, our acquaintance ends here, until some apology is made."

The quarrel with the Misses Atherton made it rather dull for Dulce, as she had to stay alone in her house. However, she passed away the

time very happily with a volume of "Little Folks."

Just before tea, Kitty stumped upstairs dressed in her best blue cloak trimmed with swansdown, and her big blue felt hat.

"Hallo, cry-baby! where have you been?" asked Henry.

"Henry, you're not to!" said Gwendoline severely.

"I've been to Mr. Jackson's with pappa and mamma," said Kitty, "and he gave me a sixpence."

"What a swindle!" said Henry. "And father always tells me not to take tips from people!"

"Don't be silly; that's different," said Betty grandly.

"You must put it in the bank, Kitty," said Dorothy.

"No," objected Kitty; "it's for chocklas."

"Well, you surely aren't going to be so greedy as to buy sixpence worth of sweets bang off!" said Henry.

"If you put it in the bank," urged Dorothy, "you can take it out in pennies."

"Well, perhaps; I'll see," said Kitty wisely, and she trotted down to be "tidied" for tea.





Chapter IV.

MISS BANKS'S TEA-PARTY.

THE next day was Sunday. The young Overtons donned their best clothes, and walked across the road to church. They all sat in a high, old-fashioned pew, over the top of which their strong young voices rang cheerfully forth. Mr. Overton preached his sermon from a very high pulpit, into which it was always Kitty's ambition to climb. Baby, aged two, had come to church with Nurse, and

sat next Kitty. Whenever Kitty caught Baby shutting her eyes, she gave her a gentle pinch on the plump hand that was folded in hers, and Baby turned in surprise, and stared wonderingly at Kitty for the next five minutes. At the other end of the pew, Gwendoline had moved all the hassocks away from Henry's nervous feet, and was trying to keep Dorothy from scraping the paint off the wooden partition.

The afternoon was passed quietly in the house. Mrs. Overton held "Sunday school" in the dining-room, where all the children repeated their collects and read verses from the Bible, and even Baby joined in the hymns. After this the class dispersed. Mr. Overton came home from his Sunday school, and Henry went for a walk with him. The others went into the schoolroom—Gwendoline, Betty, and Dulce to read, and Dorothy and Kitty to draw and write stories, for all the Overtons were clever with pen and pencil. Church occupied

their evening, and was followed by the Sunday treat for everybody—supper in the dining-room—after which the little flock were all packed off to bed at nine o'clock. One Sunday at Coldborough Vicarage was very like another—a quiet, pleasant day, with all things carried on punctually and methodically, as on every other day. And so another week began.

The introduction of the game in the attics was a great help to Nurse. She had more time to give to Baby, who, though she was a sensible little person for her years, had not yet been promoted to the games of her sisters and brother. There was no wandering about the house; no “painting day,” which always meant spilt paint-water and lost brushes; no horses or hoops up and down the long hall, which had to be stopped directly Henry shouted, or Kitty gave vent to one of her most ear-piercing squeals of delight. Baby was queen of the downstairs region. She spent her afternoons partly in the drawing-room and partly in the

library, where she had a dozen or so of round musical boxes, which she daily set out in a row on the hearthrug and played deliberately from end to end and back again, while her father wrote at his desk.

“Do you know, Gwen,” cried Betty, running into “Pansy Grove” on Monday afternoon,



“mother and father are going to London to-morrow to stay for a fortnight, and there is another man coming to take the services on Sunday ; and Tuesday is a Saint's Day, so he'll have to take the service then too.”

“Going to London?” said Gwendoline.
“How nice for mother! Well, we shall have some fun.”

"But fancy a new man that we've never seen staying here!" said Betty.

"That won't matter to us," Gwen returned. "Why, Betty, don't you remember when father went away and Mr. Tomlinson came—an old, white-haired clergyman that gave us sweets?"

"Oh," said Betty, her frown disappearing, "if he gives us sweets, it's all right. Now, let's work away," she exclaimed. "What have you been doing? Here is the sixpence mother bought that ribbon with on Saturday. I say, Gwen, shall I run down to Hodgson's and get some things?"

"I wish you didn't talk in such a dreadful hurry," said the sedate Gwendoline. "What kind of things do you mean?"

"Oh, coloured cotton — penny spools, you know, and we could wind it off on to cards; and a penny bundle of patches, the nice print ones, that are so jolly for making dolls' clothes; and narrow ribbon, and sweets," reeled off Betty.

"Very well," agreed Gwendoline, who was

dusting the counter. "But only spend fourpence, so that we'll have some left for another time. And don't buy peppermints."

"O Gwen!" said Betty. "They're so good, and you get such good weight."

"Father doesn't like us to have any sweets but toffee and chocolates," said Gwendoline.

Betty clattered down the uncarpeted attic stairs, bounded along the corridor, and down another flight into the hall.

A few minutes later she came out of Hodgson's shop to see Dorothy coming towards her, carrying a tempting white parcel.

"Only a penny each," she said mysteriously, "and I've got two."

"What are they?" asked Betty.

"You'll know soon," said Dorothy, hugging the parcel tighter.

"All right," cried Betty indignantly. "I was going to show you my things, but I won't now—so there!"

"I don't want to see them," Dorothy as-

sured her. "I know it's something for the shop."

"I'm not going to tell you," said Betty; and they walked home together in silence.

Betty's tongue was loosened directly she entered "Pansy Grove," and she and Gwendoline were busily setting out their latest goods



when a note was pushed under the door. It was addressed to the Misses Atherton, and bore one of the little postage stamps which Gwendoline had painted and perforated with the sewing machine. The note ran thus :—

"Miss Banks and the banker rekwest the

pleasure of Miss Atherton and the other Miss Atherton to tea at a quarter to four. Hurry up."

"Come along, let's go now," said Gwendoline,



and they hastily brushed back their hair, put on brown paper hats, and walked sedately across the passage.

Kitty was playing the bank servant for the occasion, and she ushered them into a neat dining-room, furnished with a rickety little table, a rickety little bench, and some chairs.

"Don't look at the table," said Miss Banks, hurrying in to greet her visitors. "Oh, dear Miss Atherton, I am so glad to see you. I asked darling Mrs. Dashwood, but she said she

had fought with you and could not come, so I am going to send her a few cough cakes by Eliza May."

Here the younger Miss Atherton's eyes were forcibly drawn to the table. What she saw was a couple of dolls' plates piled up with cough lozenges.

Miss Banks begged her visitors to be seated.

"Will you go to that end, and you to the other end of the bench? and both sit down at once, or the other end will go up," she said, in her grandest voice. "The banker will soon be here, so we may as well go on with our tea."

"Oh yes," said Miss Atherton absently, as she took one of the cough lozenges.

"Dorothy," said Betty, "what queer things to have for tea. Were those what you were buying in the village?"

"Yes," said Dorothy, blushing rosily. "They were done up in such pretty coloured packets, and I thought they were lemon kali."

"Never mind," said Gwendoline; "they're

very nice.—And, Betty, I know you like them very much.”

“Why, of course; they’re delicious,” said the other Miss Atherton good-naturedly.

Dorothy looked pleased, and handed them each a miniature cup of water and sugar, which they proceeded to sip daintily. Henry came in, shook hands, and sat down on a low chair at the foot of the table. He then whistled for Kitty.

“Jane may have tea with us to-day,” he said; “she looks hungry.”

“Her name is Eliza May,” said Miss Banks.

“Does she generally have no tea, may I ask?” said Miss Atherton, junior.

“Oh yes,” replied Kitty, “I assure you I does, when I live wif Mrs. Dash-a-wood.”

“Don’t be silly, Kitty,” said Miss Banks. “You must pretend you always live here.”

Tea passed with very little talk. Every one partook heartily of cough lozenges; and when Kitty announced that she had eaten twelve, Gwendoline thought it wise to forbid her to

have any more. They were a very modified form of lozenge, with no strong flavour of chlorodyne about them; but, still, Kitty was small, and unaccustomed to any sweets except plain chocolate.

Hardly was the party at an end, when the tea-bell rang loudly, and there was a rush and a scramble for the stairs. Owing to the "cough cakes," nobody had a very good appetite for tea, and Mrs. Overton began to suspect something. She was not surprised when Nurse came in and told her that Kitty was sick, and had had to be carried away from the table.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Overton; "something must have disagreed with her.—Children, what have you been eating up there to-day?"

"Cough lozenges," said Henry, in a weak voice.

"We'll never buy them again, mother," said Dorothy; and indeed her face was so "pasty" and unhappy that the promise was not needed.

Towards the end of the meal Henry began to

fidget on his chair. "May I go, please, mother?" he said. "I don't feel very well."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Overton, much disturbed. "I think you had better go straight to bed."

"Gwendoline," said Mr. Overton gravely, "how often have I told you that the children are to have no sweets except chocolates? I must put an end to your games in the attics if you cannot be more obedient."

It was not Gwendoline's nature to attempt to excuse herself, so she bent her head guiltily and murmured,—

"We won't do it again, father."

It was lucky for Dulce that Miss Banks had only condescended to send her a very few "cough cakes," so that she was not at all unwell, and did not even complain of drowsiness and a headache, which was the effect they had on Betty. Poor Betty and Gwendoline! After all, they were a good little pair of elder sisters. Betty suffered the consequences of eating against

her will to please Dorothy ; and Gwen had to go to bed without her father's kiss, because she had let him believe her disobedient rather than throw the blame on her younger sister.





Chapter V.

TELEGRAPH WIRES.

FORTUNATELY, the effects of the cough lozenges were not very serious, and the various ladies resumed their visiting and shopping next day with unabated energy. The banker "locked up" his office, and put up a placard bearing the notice, "Banking kontinude at half-passed four," and went out on business—that is, for a walk with his father.

Miss Banks found solitude very tiresome. Therefore she asked Mrs. Dashwood to spend the day with her, and they laid their heads together and invented a "grand new thing." This was an ingenious arrangement for telegraphy.

At either end of the passage, close to the wall, was placed a cane-bottomed chair. Between these ran a long double cord, slipped round the top bar of each chair-back, so that it could be worked easily over the bar. On the chairs Dulce placed large books to serve as writing-pads, and Dorothy cut slips of paper for telegram forms, attaching to each piece two ends of cord, by which it might be fastened to the "wire" and worked along to the other chair.

Feeling extremely proud of their arrangement, Mrs. Dashwood and Miss Banks rapped simultaneously on the door of "Pansy Grove." Miss Atherton, junior, opened it, and ushered them into the pretty little sitting-room.

"Please, we've come to tea," said Miss Banks.

“Don’t be silly, Dorothy. Ladies wouldn’t say that,” said Miss Atherton, junior, severely.

“All right, then; we’ve come to see you,” said Dorothy.



“Could your sister come in too?” asked Mrs. Dashwood.

“She will be delighted, I am sure,” replied Betty. “Gwendolina!” she called; and Miss Atherton entered. She had heard the voices

from the shop, and came prepared, carrying the ever ready tea-tray.

“Did you get those biscuits at Hodgson’s, Gwen? How do you do?” said Miss Banks.

“How do you do?” said Miss Atherton, ignoring the question, and setting down the tray. “Now you are here, you must have some tea.”

“Thank you, I shall be most pleased,” said Mrs. Dashwood politely.

“But hurry up, ’cos I’m dying to get away,” said Miss Banks. “Have you heard of the new telegram places?”

“Offices,” corrected Mrs. Dashwood.

“Yes, officers,” said Miss Banks. “Well, anyway, do you know about them?”

“But there aren’t any,” said Miss Atherton. “And, besides, we hardly need them here.”

“Oh, I think they’ll be very convenient if we want to send telegrams to one another,” said Miss Banks.

“Don’t be silly,” said the younger Miss

Atherton. "People don't send telegrams to people next door."

"I wish Betty wasn't always telling people not to be silly," said Dorothy. "Well, let's go on. But I assure you, Miss Atherton, there are two out on the road."

"Two what's? Two telegrams?" asked Betty.

"No, those things they write them in; it begins with an 'o'—orchards, I think they are."

"Offices," said Mrs. Dashwood.—"Perhaps the Misses Atherton will take a walk out and suspect the wires."

The ladies of the house were about to retire and don their hats, when Miss Gladys Dashwood burst unceremoniously into the house and pushed open the drawing-room door. Her face was rosy and indignant.

"*Dat's* where you are!" she cried. "And leff me all alone! Come back, or I'll go and tell pappa."

"Hush, Kitty; don't be so fussy," said Miss Atherton. "Sit down and have some tea."

Down flopped Miss Dashwood on the floor, where she was soon pacified with biscuits and a concoction of raspberry jam and water.

“What are the cords for, and the chairs, on the road?” she asked; but Dulce silenced her with a frown. Kitty knew Dulce too well to attempt to speak after one of those frowns.

Tea over, the ladies walked out into the passage to see the telegraphy arrangements.

“Very nice,” said Betty.

“What a good idea!” exclaimed Gwen-doline.

Miss Banks and Mrs. Dashwood were greatly pleased.

“Yes, *isn't* it nice? *Wasn't* it a good idea?” they cried.

“O—oh!” squealed Kitty, in delight. “Look at the nice papers to write on!”

“Now,” said Mrs. Dashwood, “I’ll show you how it works.” And she fastened on a slip of paper, and sent it whirling down to the other end of the cord.

This was loudly applauded—so loudly that the tea-bell rang unnoticed.

“Let’s send some telegrams now,” said Miss Atherton. — “You go to the other end, Betty.”

“And me here,” said Miss Dashwood.

“No, Kitty,” cried Betty; “only two can do it at a time. Besides, you can’t spell or anything.”

“And nor can Henry,” retorted Miss Gladys; “’cos pappa said he spelt Tiffalgar Square wrong.”

“Never mind; Henry’s not here to get the benefit of your remarks,” said Miss Atherton, junior. “Run away, like a good girl, and play at something else.—Now, Gwen.”

“Yes, run along, Kitty,” said Dulce. “Dorothy and I aren’t bothering to play, although we did invent it, and ought to have the first game.”

“All right; do, do!” cried Betty hotly. “I’m sure *we* don’t want to stop you!”

"No, we don't want to," cried Dulce and Dorothy. "You may play; we'd rather not."

"Oh dear, don't fight!" pleaded Gwendoline. — "Betty, it's so babyish of you!"

At this juncture the stairs door opened, and Nurse arrived on the scene.

"Come to tea, dears," she said. "The bell rang long ago. What were you thinking about?"

"We never heard it, Nurse," said Gwendoline.

"I didn't—I didn't," came in a chorus from the others.

"Nanny, come and see my house," said Dulce.

"And it's mine too," said Kitty.

"And do look at the telegraph wires," said Dorothy.

"And our shop—it's so grand," said Betty.

"And Henry's bank," added Dorothy.

"Hush, hush! what a babel!" laughed Nurse. "Not now, dears; some other day."

“What will your father say when you come in late for tea?”

“Pappa’s going away to-night,” Kitty said, as Nurse hurried her little flock downstairs.

“And mother,” said Betty.

“And another man,” said Kitty proudly.

“Don’t be silly, Kitty. The other man is coming, not going away,” said Betty.

“Nanny,” put in Dorothy, “Betty is always telling us not to be silly.”

“Tell her not to, will you, Nanny?” said Dulce.

“Tell them not to squabble, please, Nanny,” said Gwendoline.

“I know what I’ll tell you,” said Nurse. “I’ll tell you all to be good, and not to have any more shops and houses, if I hear any more complaints.”

Nurse had a good-natured, gentle way of scolding which always had effect. Her least command was law, for the children knew that, in spite of her kind face and gentle manner,

the smallest disobedience would not be overlooked.

Mr. and Mrs. Overton's train went at half-past six, so tea was an early and rather hurried meal. Their departure for London was a mixed pleasure to the children. Gwendoline realized that for some days there would be no mother in



the house, and that meant more to Gwendoline than to most children. Betty, Dulce, and Dorothy expected to find everything downstairs strangely empty. Henry declared it was "jolly;" and the little ones enjoyed the novelty.

It was strange to find no breakfast laid in the

dining-room the next morning, and Gwen and Betty had to join the nursery party for all their meals.

Perhaps it was duller for Nurse than for any one else, for she and Baby had the downstairs regions to themselves.





Chapter VI.

"UNCLE PER."

SATURDAY evening was an exciting one for the Overtons. The strange clergyman was to arrive by an early train, and Gwendoline was told she might go with Martin to meet him. Martin was the old gardener, coachman, and general handy-man; and Gwen felt very important as she seated herself beside him in the dingy little trap and took his switch to flick the lazy pony.

The Reverend Alfred Percival Denham was

a young, good-looking clergyman. He took Gwendoline's hand heartily, and stepped into the governess car as if he had never driven in any other kind of vehicle, so Gwen need not have been ashamed of its shabbiness.

“Are you left in charge?” asked Mr. Denham, as the pony started off at a brisk trot.

“Yes,” said Gwendoline shyly; “I am in charge till mother comes back.”

“Of how many?” asked Mr. Denham.

Gwendoline did not understand. She blushed confusedly, and looked inquiringly at him.

“How many sisters and brothers?” he said, smiling.

“Oh,” said Gwendoline, brightening, “five sisters and one brother. It's very dull without father and mother,” she added.

“Don't you play games? Why, when there are so many of you, you should have no end of fun.”

“So we do,” replied Gwen eagerly. “Betty

and I have a shop, and Henry has a bank, and the others have houses, and we have such fun.”

“I am sure you must,” said Mr. Denham. “I hope you will show me all the houses, and perhaps I may join the game.”

Gwendoline almost jumped with surprise. She looked up shyly, under the brim of her hat, to see if he meant it seriously. He was smiling good-naturedly, and it was evident he meant all he said.

“Do you—will you really play with us?” faltered Gwen, in a low voice.

“Play with you? Why, of course, if I may,” said Mr. Denham.

Gwendoline fairly danced in her seat. Oh, how could she wait to tell Betty!

Martin flicked the pony with her switch, and they were soon wheeling slowly up the hilly avenue to the Vicarage. Gwendoline sprang nimbly out, and ran round to open the hall door before she went to pet the faithful



*"Now, Baby darling," said Betty, "you are to live with Dorothy
in that little house."*

“Maggie.” Nurse met them in the hall, and took Mr. Denham away.

Gwendoline flew upstairs, and burst into the bedroom she shared with Betty.

Betty was sitting up in bed, waiting eagerly for what news her sister might have.

“O Betty!” exclaimed Gwen, in an excited undertone, “he’s awfully nice, and he talked the whole way home, and he’s going to play with us, he says; and he says we must show him all our houses.”



“How lovely! Shut the door, though; he might be lurking about,” whispered Betty. “Now, come along; be quick and undress, and tell me all about it.”

Gwendoline and Betty talked late that night, and it was not until Kitty, with tears in her

sleepy blue eyes, pattered in, in her long white nightgown, and asked them to “pease be a little kieter,” that they stopped their chatter.

The next morning all the little ones were eager to hear about Mr. Denham, but Gwen and Betty pushed them away, telling them they would soon see him ; so they had to be content with craning their necks to have a good look at him in the high pulpit at the morning service.

After supper that evening Mr. Denham asked if Gwendoline and Betty would go into the study and “amuse him.” These two young ladies, who had had all their meals with him by special request, were only too glad to be his entertainers.

Gwendoline brought a photograph album, and opened it on Mr. Denham’s knees.

“This is father’s book,” she said. “It has all our old photographs in it, you see. This is Betty when she was a baby.”

“What a jolly baby you were, Betty,” said

the clergyman, smiling. “I have several little nieces and nephews, one just about that size.”

“Oh,” said Betty, “then you are an uncle!”

“Yes, I am Uncle Per,” said he.

“What a funny name!” said Gwen.

“I like it,” asserted Betty, “and I’m going to call you Uncle Per, if you don’t mind.”

“I should like it better than anything,” said Mr. Denham. “And now, what shall we play at?”

“Oh, do you know any nice Sunday games?” asked Gwendoline.

“Let me think,” said “Uncle Per,” leaning back in his chair and gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling. “I know blindman’s buff.”

“But that isn’t a Sunday game,” said Gwen.

“It is too noisy,” said Betty; “and you are a clergyman, and *they* don’t play noisy games on Sunday.”

Mr. Denham felt himself reproved.

“I’ll tell you a story,” he suggested.

“The very thing!” cried Betty, sitting up

close beside him on the sofa, while Gwendoline perched herself on the head cushion.

And so they sat, listening intently, while he told them the wonderful old stories of Jacob's ladder, and of the baby Moses; and bedtime came too soon for them that night.

“I'm so glad you came, Uncle Per,” said Betty, as they rose to leave him.

“And what should I have done without you to amuse me?” replied Mr. Denham, smiling.

“You amused us,” corrected Gwendoline; and then they bade him good-night and went away.

“I don't think,” said Betty, as she lighted her candle—“I don't *think* he tells those stories so well as mother does.”



Chapter VII.

TWO NEW CHAR- ACTERS.



“GOOD-MORN-
ING, Uncle
Per,” cried
two laughing voices.

“Good-morning, my
nieces,” said Mr. Den-
ham, rising from his
breakfast to shake hands
with the intruders.

“Why, we’ve done our breakfast,” cried
Betty; “and as you have a whole day with
nothing to do, we want you to come up to the
attics and see all our houses.”

“That is, if you want to,” said Gwendoline.

“Certainly ; I shall be ready directly, if you will sit down and talk to me.”

“Only don’t hurry for us,” said polite Gwen.

Mr. Denham promised not to hurry, but it seemed to the children that his breakfast was a very short meal, and they led him upstairs to the attics, where the younger ones were already assembled.

“This is our shop,” said Gwen, conducting the visitor into “Pansy Grove.” Betty flew behind the counter, and began to open boxes for his inspection.

“Uncle Per” dived into his pockets and brought out several small silver coins.

“Now, what am I to buy ?” he asked.

“Oh, but not with real money,” said Gwendoline hastily. “Look, we have some mock money here.”

“Ah, I see,” said Mr. Denham ; “but I think you must let me buy a real shilling’s worth of something nice from you.”

Gwendoline blushed to the roots of her hair.

“Oh no, really, Mr. Denham. You’re very kind, but father doesn’t like us to take money.”

“Perhaps he won’t mind it this once,” said the customer; “and if he does, you must lay all the blame on me.”

Gwendoline could say no more. She took the shilling with profuse thanks, and asked him what he wished to buy. “Uncle Per” chose ribbon, and finally marched away with yards of coloured paper in his pocket.

“I say,” said “Uncle Per,” after he had investigated all the attic dwellings, “why don’t you give Baby a house?”

“Oh,” cried a chorus of voices, “she’s *far* too little!”

“I don’t think so,” said Mr. Denham. “I’m sure, if you gave her a house in that corner by the stairs, she would be quite happy.”

Gwendoline smiled slowly.

“It might be rather fun,” she said.

“Yes,” agreed Betty.—“Shall we, Gwen?”

“I think it is a splendid plan,” said Gwen-

doline, "and I suggest that we make the house at once."

"Shall I be the architect?" asked Mr. Denham; and the children clapped their hands delightedly.

Gwendoline fetched newspapers, string, and a shawl for a carpet, and in a very short time a most comfortable little house was erected at the top of the staircase.

"How cosy!" exclaimed Dorothy, creeping in to investigate the one room. "Why, I shouldn't mind living here myself!"

"Well, you can live with Baby if you like," said Betty. "I'm sure she'll cry if we leave her all alone in a little wee house."

"How lovely!" cried Dorothy—"if Henry doesn't mind."

"Not a bit," agreed Henry.

Gwendoline ran downstairs, soon returning with Baby and Nurse. After delivering many injunctions, Nurse went down again, leaving Baby to investigate her new house.

“Now, Baby darling,” said Betty, kneeling down before her and smoothing down her pinafore, “you are to live with Dorothy in that little house.”

Baby stared from Dorothy to the house, and said “Es,” with a slowly dawning smile.

“You’ll be Miss Jinks, won’t you, Baby?” cried Mr. Denham, hoisting the newcomer up on his shoulder.

“What a ‘spiffy’ name!” cried Betty, while Baby crowed and shouted, “Miss Dinks! Miss Dinks!” not knowing at all what she was talking about.

“Let’s begin at once,” said Dulce.

Baby trotted away quite happily with Dorothy, and they were soon in the thick of the game. The obliging “Uncle Per” offered to be “Mr. Stickinthemud,” a visitor of the Misses Athertons’, and was soon “making believe” as ardently as any of them.

Dorothy found life rather dull with only Baby for her companion, and suggested that

they should go forth and call at "Pansy Grove."

"And remember, Baby," she said, "you are Miss Jinks, a grown-up lady like mother."

"Oh yes," said Baby wisely, and she toddled after Dorothy to the Athertons' door.

Seeing a long cord hanging beside the latch, Dorothy gave it a pull, half expecting to hear the distant tinkle of a bell.

"Stop! Don't pull that!" cried Betty from within; and the lady visitors, pushing open the door, found Mr. Denham mounted on a chair, erecting a truly wonderful door-bell by means of a broken tumbler and a glass marble.

"Oh, you're making a bell!" said Miss Banks. "Well, we've come to call. Can I see the Misses Atherton?"

"Certainly. Step this way," and Betty showed them into the drawing-room.

"Ding-ta-ding-ta-ding!" she called, which brought Gwendoline from the shop.

“Oh, how do you do, Miss Banks?” she said.
—“And you, too, Miss Jinks?”

“Quite well, thanks; the same to you,” said Miss Banks.

“Kite well, sank,” echoed Miss Jinks politely.

All the ladies sat down, and silence reigned.

Presently Miss Banks, struck with a sudden thought, exclaimed,—

“I say, we never send any telegrams. I don’t see the good of Dulce and me making the wires and all.”

“You always say wrong things, Dorothy,” sighed Miss Atherton despairingly. “I sent Mrs. Dashwood two telegrams this morning,” she said, in a matter-of-fact voice.

“Have you seen our man visitor?” asked Miss Atherton, junior, anxiously.

“No,” said Miss Banks; “I’d like to, though.”

“Would you? Then I’ll call him in,” said Miss Atherton.—“Oh, Gwen, what’s his name, again?”

“Mr. Stickinthemud,” said her sister.

“Mr. Stickinthemud,” called Miss Atherton, junior, opening the flimsy door, “can you come here? Two friends of mine would like to see you.”

In a few minutes Mr. Stickinthemud came in, bending his head so as to get through the doorway without breaking the wall. He was formally introduced to the visitors, who regarded him with cool, scrutinizing stares. Miss Atherton hurried away to fetch the tea-tray, while Mr. Stickinthemud sat down beside Miss Banks and remarked,—

“Delightful weather, is it not?”

“Lovely, except the rain,” said Miss Banks cuttingly.

Mr. Stickinthemud was about to help himself out of his error, when Miss Jinks, who had been gazing out of the window in the one solid wall, made a rush for it, shouting excitedly,—

“O—oh! ’*Moke!*”

The younger Miss Atherton ran to her, and brought her back to her chair. "Baby mustn't look out at trains now," she said severely. "You are Miss Jinks, not Baby."

Perhaps her hostess "plumped" her down extra hard on the chair; at any rate, Miss Jinks burst into tears.



"Baby doesn't like Miss Dinks; her likes Baby," she wailed sadly.

Mr. Stickinthemud was on his feet in a moment, and hoisted the sobbing Miss Jinks up in his arms.

"Poor Baby," he said. "Cheer up, old girl ;

we shan't call you names any more. Here comes Gwen with cakes. Look !”

For Gwendoline, enriched by the liberality of the customer that morning, had dispatched Betty to the village in quest of “fairy cakes.”

Baby was naturally good-tempered, and she stopped crying suddenly, and sat contentedly on kind “Uncle Per’s” knee while the tea was handed round.

Betty was much chagrined. She had hoped that all the visitors would behave well while Mr. Stickinthemud was there ; but instead of fulfilling her expectations, every one had been especially tiresome.

“Have you ever noticed,” said Miss Banks, “that Gwen talks just like father’s ‘company voice’ when she’s playing houses?”

“Be quiet, Dorothy,” frowned Miss Atherton, junior.

Mr. Stickinthemud laughed heartily, but Betty was not pleased. “Of course he laughs,”

she said to herself, "but he must think us very silly."

She was secretly glad when Miss Banks and Miss Jinks went home.

"We won't have Baby to play any more," she said to Gwendoline.

"No," said Gwendoline; "I don't think she enjoys it much, after all."





Chapter VIII.

"CHANGES."

MR. DENHAM went away the next morning at eleven o'clock. He took an affectionate farewell of his young friends at the Vicarage, and Gwendoline and Betty drove him to the station in the little governess car. They were very sorry to say "good-bye" to him, and Betty tried to impress upon him that he *must* come again the next time father went away. "Uncle Per" assured her that he would like nothing better, and as he waved to them from the window of the railway carriage they all felt like old friends.

Gwendoline and Betty would have been very sad had not “Uncle Per” bought them a large box of chocolates at the station, which made a pleasant diversion as they drove homewards.

It was about this time that everything began to change. Mr. and Mrs. Overton came home, and Gwendoline and Betty, at very short notice, were packed off to a boarding school in the south of England.

Dulce and Dorothy “bought” the shop, but life in the attics seemed very dull without the ringleaders and founders of the game. Mr. Denham sent them a box of splendid imitation money, which kept up their ardour for some time; but at last the children gave it all up, and settled down to write stories, and draw pictures, and play in the garden instead. Mr. Overton had the shop cleared away, and turned “Pansy Grove” into a very comfortable smoking-room, putting up over the door, as a joke, a placard inscribed—

“*Chimpanzee Grove.*”

There was a feeling of sadness in the hearts of the children as they watched the transformation of the old “shop,” and Dorothy was even caught shedding tears over the broken-down counter. Still, they knew it was most unlikely that the game would ever be resumed with any enthusiasm.

When Gwendoline and Betty came home for their holidays, they were “too old” for the attics, and the younger ones tried to feel the same. But it was not so nice as it used to be in the winter; and once or twice Dulce and Dorothy journeyed up to the top of the house, where they might be seen working the old “telegraph wires,” and heard relapsing into the familiar names of “Mrs. Dashwood” and “Miss Banks.”

At last Gwen and Betty thought of a grand idea: they would get up some private theatricals. It was nearing Christmas, and what could be better for that festive time than a play?

“We’ve got a splendid plan, children,” said

Betty, opening the nursery door one afternoon to the younger members of the family, who had been out for a walk. “Come in, if you want to hear it.”

Anything with an air of mystery about it was dear to the hearts of the young Overtons, so they were all shut into the nursery in less time than it takes to write it.

“Children,” said Gwendoline, “we are going to have a dramatic committee.”

“What’s that?” asked Dulce.

“Why, don’t you know what dramatic means?” said Betty, horrified at this display of ignorance.

“It means acting—giving plays, you know.”

“I know!” cried Dorothy. “Like at the circus father took us to last summer.”

“Not quite like that,” said Betty. “But listen; Gwen will tell you all about it.”

“It’s going to be called the Coldborough Entertaining Committee,” said Gwendoline, “and we are to have a play every holidays, when Betty and I come home.”

“In a theatre?” asked Kitty, who had listened in wide-eyed astonishment.

“No, in one of the attics,” said Betty. “Gwen and I are going to make a grand stage in the middle attic.”

“Oh, you won’t be able to,” said Dulce, “’cos mother has had all the boxes and things moved in there, and there won’t be any room for acting.”

“I daresay we can have them moved,” said Gwendoline. “At any rate, children, we want to have some acting at Christmas, and there will be a committee meeting to-morrow afternoon at three. So, run away! There’s the tea-bell.”

The next afternoon at three o’clock, Dulce, Dorothy, Kitty, and Henry walked seriously into the nursery, all looking very business-like. They found Gwen and Betty seated one at each end of the table, and Baby in the middle.

“What’s Baby there for?” asked the four newcomers all together.

“Hush!” said Betty. “All sit down,” and

she pointed to the chairs which stood round the table.

Gwendoline, who had pens, ink, and paper before her, stood up to make a speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen—Mr. Chairman,” she began, clearing her throat, “I stand up to lay before you the—er—the conditions of the Coldborough Entertaining Committee. Miss Baby Overton is president, and I, ladies and gentlemen, am the secretary, and you, ladies and gentlemen, are the committee.”

“Then what’s Betty?” asked Henry.

“Oh, she’s the chairman,” said Gwendoline.—“Ladies and gentlemen, the business before us this afternoon is to consider the play which we intend to act at Christmas.”

“Well,” said Betty, “the play is called ‘The Three Little Pigs.’”

“That’s not a play,” said Dulce.

“Oh, a stupid old nursery rhyme,” said Henry, who sat rather sulkily kicking the nearest leg of the table.

“This play,” continued Betty, ignoring these comments, “was originally written as a story for children, but I and the secretary have converted it into a play in every way suitable to our requirements.”

“I wish Betty wouldn’t say such long words,” whimpered Kitty. “What about ‘The Three Little Pigs,’ Gwen?”

“It’s the name of our acting,” said Gwendoline.—“Now, ladies and gentlemen, let us choose the characters.”

“All right,” said Betty. “Who’ll be the pigs?”

At this juncture the president crowed loudly, and exclaimed “Pigs!” in an approving voice.

“The president agrees to the play, you see,” said Gwendoline.

“Oh, dear little president!” cried Dulce, being suddenly inspired to embrace that dignitary.

“Top!” cried the president, in a voice of command.

“Hush, Dulce! That isn’t the way to behave at entertaining committees,” said Betty.

“I know,” said Gwendoline. “Dulce, Dorothy, and Kitty can be the pigs.”

“Why?” asked Betty.

“Because they are nice and small,” said Gwen. —“And then, Betty, you can be the wolf, who comes down the chimney.”

“You’ll never manage it,” said Henry. “How do you suppose Betty is to come down a chimney?”

“Oh, *you* don’t know, Henry,” said Betty. “We’ve got all kinds of arrangements.”

Henry subsided, and Dulce asked,—

“Aren’t you going to act, Gwen?”

“No,” said Gwen. “I’ll be the stage manager.”

“What will I have to do, Betty?”

“We’ll show you all in good time, my dear,” said Betty reassuringly.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Gwendoline, “I don’t see what else we can do just now, but we shall call another meeting at an early date. I now adjourn the meeting.”

“I like the way the secretary does all the

speaking," said Henry, who evidently scorned the whole affair.

"Henry needn't belong to the committee unless he likes," said Betty grandly.

"Oh yes, I'll *belong*," said Henry condescendingly.





Chapter IX.

CHRISTMAS DAY.

AFTER that there were rehearsals for the acting every day. For once the young Overtons looked forward to something beyond Christmas Day, for the acting was to take place on the following evening.

One Christmas Day is much like another everywhere, and so it was at Coldborough Vicarage; and it was always a very happy day. In the morning every one went to church at eleven, and the children joined heartily in the

old Christmas hymns which they had been singing at home the evening before. The next thing was dinner, and this involved the drawing of the curtains and general darkening of the dining-room, that the flaming plum-pudding might be seen to advantage. Baby was frightened at the pudding, and had to be carried away until the room was light again.

The afternoon was a monotonous time, and, as Kitty remarked, "was two of the usual afternoons joined together." Nurse suggested carols, and read to them for a while; but by the time the clock struck four, Gwendoline was standing looking out of the window, Betty had let her book fall to the ground and was sitting listlessly at the table, Dulce, Dorothy, and Kitty were quarrelling, Baby was asleep, and Henry was wandering round the room, wishing aloud that the tea-bell would ring.

After tea came the most exciting part of the whole day. This was the "bran pie."

Gwendoline and Betty were the privileged

ones who helped their parents to carry in the neatly-addressed parcels which had been collected in a big box for several weeks, and clear the schoolroom to make room for the washing-tub full of bran, which was placed in the middle of the floor. This year there were so many presents that the round flat bath and a smaller tub had been called in to help, and filled with bran. When the chairs had been set round, and the candles lighted, all was ready, and Betty rang the dinner-bell loudly in the hall.

No bell was needed, however, to bring Dulce, Dorothy, Kitty, and Henry running to the schoolroom; while Nurse, coming behind with Baby, told them to be steady.

"Oh, what a lot of presents!" exclaimed Kitty.

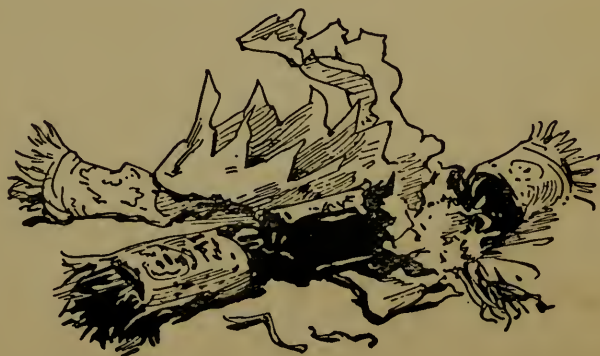
"O—o—oh!" cried Baby. "Two bran pies and a big, big tarp!"

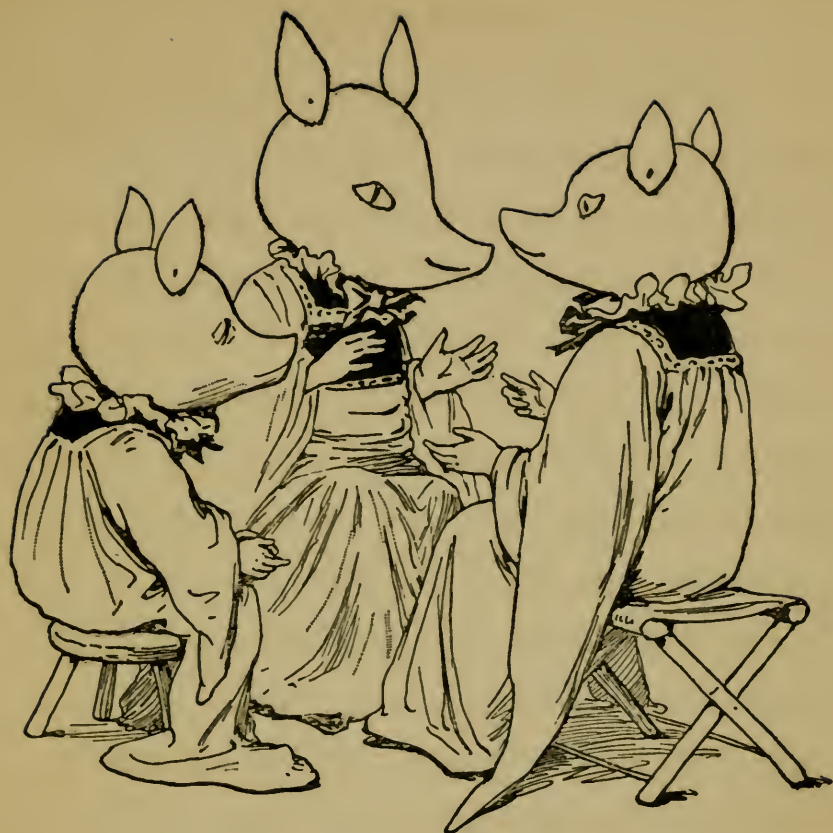
"Baby first," cried Betty. And Baby opened the ceremony by plunging her arms elbow-deep

into the smallest tub and bringing out a large parcel and a great deal of bran.

Mr. Overton took the parcel, read out the name, and unwrapped it, handing it to the excited little person who stood ready to receive it. Then came Kitty's dip, then Dorothy's, and so on till it came round to Baby again, and till the "pies" and the "tart" were empty, and every one had a good pile of presents.

Supper followed, with crackers, almonds and raisins, sweets and lemonade; and then there was a universal "good - night," and all the Overtons marched upstairs to bed.





Chapter X.

“THE THREE LITTLE PIGS.”

ALL the next day Gwendoline and Betty were busy in the “middle attic,” arranging the stage and seats for the audience. A final dress rehearsal was held in the afternoon, and at six o'clock the performance began.

The stage was an ingenious arrangement, on a raised platform covered with bright green baize, which, said Gwen, the stage manager, would “do for grass.” The footlights were made by means of half a dozen short stout candles, and the same number of coffee tins, or, rather, halves of coffee tins. At the back of the stage was suspended a huge sheet of white paper, painted brilliantly to represent a wood in the foreground, and fields and fences in the background. A dark-blue cotton curtain was rigged up in front, on which Gwendoline had cleverly painted a rose, thistle, and shamrock in bright red paint, and the letters “C. E. C.”

The attic which had once been Mrs. Dashwood’s house was used as a green-room, and a regular babel of fuss and confusion was going on therein when Betty marched to the top of the stairs and rang the dinner-bell, and shouted in a solemn voice,—

“Walk up, walk up, ladies and gentlemen, to see the live lion stuffed with straw.”

As soon as she returned to the green-room, Dulce said,—

“Why did you say that? It was awfully silly.”

“Sh! Don’t squabble now; there’s no time,” said Gwendoline.—“Here, Dorothy, let me put on your head,” and she began to fasten on with strings of tape a piece of cardboard, cut and painted to represent the head of a pig.—“Now, you must remember, all of you, not to turn your faces to the audience—only the sides where your pigs’ heads are.”

“O Gwen, you’ve told us that at every single rehearsal,” said Dulce.

“Oh, oh!” squealed Kitty, who had been peeping out of the door, and who now banged it and came jumping in again. “Here comes mother and father, and Jane and Nurse, and Mr. Smith and another lady.”

“Are they? Oh, hurry up; *do* hurry up!” cried Dulce.—“Gwen, Gwen, where are my shoes?”

"Hush, Dulce ; don't make such a fuss, or you'll never be ready," said Gwendoline. "Here are your shoes."

"Oh, don't Dorothy and Kitty look funny?" cried Betty ; for those two young people were scuttling about with long loose blue robes and their pigs' heads on.

"Listen ! all the people are in," said Dulce. "We'll never be in time."

Just then, Henry, who was not acting, looked



in at the door and said, "I say, hurry up, girls!" and then went off into fits of laughter at the sight of the three pigs and Baby, who was a white rabbit, in a tight-fitting calico skin, with long ears, and black beads for eyes.

"Run along, Henry, and tell them we'll be ready in a minute," said Betty, struggling into her brown wolf's clothes, and tying on her cardboard head.

Henry obeyed, and before long, with a great

deal of whispering, the actors trooped on to the stage. Betty, who was not in the first act, helped Gwendoline to manage the curtain, which went up by a series of convulsive jerks, only to come running down again with redoubled speed.

Mr. Overton rose to help them, but Gwen called out,—

“Never mind, father ; we can manage.”

And, with a good deal of fumbling, Gwendoline and Betty got the curtain fixed, and it went up successfully this time, disclosing the scene where the three little pigs (failing a mother) were sitting together planning how they would go out into the world to seek their fortunes. This called forth great applause ; but still more clapping and laughter arose with the second scene, where the little white rabbit, hitherto believed by the



audience to be an inanimate object, began to hop slowly across the stage.

Much to the delight and pride of the stage manager, the play went smoothly, and each little pig successfully carried through the dialogue with the wolf,—

“Tiny pig, tiny pig, may I come in?”

“Oh no, by the hairs on my chinny-chin-chin.”

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house in!”

until it came to the scene where the tiniest of all the tiny pigs sits alone in his little stick hut.

Now, the stick house had been erected too hastily to be very secure, and as Kitty sat curled up inside it, down came the sticks on top of her, and Miss Tiny Pig burst into tears, wailing dismally,—

“I’ve forgotten what I’m to say!”

In an instant all was confusion, and Kitty was carried off the stage by Mr. Overton.

“Oh, father,” said the wolf, coming forward,

“we can’t do without Kitty; she’ll spoil the play if she doesn’t come back.”

“Yes, I’ll go, I’ll act,” said Kitty, struggling off her father’s knee; and she trotted off beside Betty, stumbling over her long blue gown.

Although Gwendoline and Betty were much annoyed at this disturbance, they cheered up, and put up the stick hut once more, so that all went evenly till the end of the play.

The children were congratulated when it was finished, and they felt that, after all, the first play given by the Coldborough Entertaining Committee had been a decided success.





Chapter XI.

CONCLUSION.

DURING the remaining week of the Christmas holidays, the Overtons devised a new way of amusing themselves, in shape of a very lively game called "mad dog," a new form of "hide-and-seek." The "mad dog" hides himself somewhere about the house, ready to pounce out on his seekers, and great is the excitement when he makes a capture.

Every morning after breakfast there was an inroad on the study, and a chorus of voices calling,—

“Come and play mad dog, please, father.”

And Mr. Overton would invariably answer “Yes,” and be led off in triumph to join the romp, which served to “warm up” the children for the rest of the day.

The week seemed to pass very quickly, and, before long, Gwendoline and Betty were preparing for their return to school.

“No more mad dog,” sighed Betty, on the morning of their departure, as she flattened her nose against the cold window-pane and watched for the hired conveyance which was to take them to the station.

“No more theatricals,” said Dulce, drawling out the long word with a sense of pride.

“No more anything,” said Betty.

“There’s school,” interposed Gwen briskly.—

“Is Hamilton coming, Betty?”

“Yes, here he comes!” cried Dorothy, spring-

ing off the window-seat and waving her muff.
“I’m going to the station.”

In spite of the younger ones’ high spirits, it was a sad little party that hurried down to the door, where the covered carriage waited.

“Good-bye, mother. Yes, we’ll go over the bridge, not over the rails. We’ll be quite warm.—Good-bye, father; good-bye, Nurse; good-bye, good-bye!”

And then the door was shut on a carriageful of Overtons, and the wheels rolled down the avenue which led from Coldborough Vicarage to the road.





The End

